Long Arm of the Government Rankles Western Landowners

Anger Informs Bush Review of Clinton Monument Designations

By Eric Pianin
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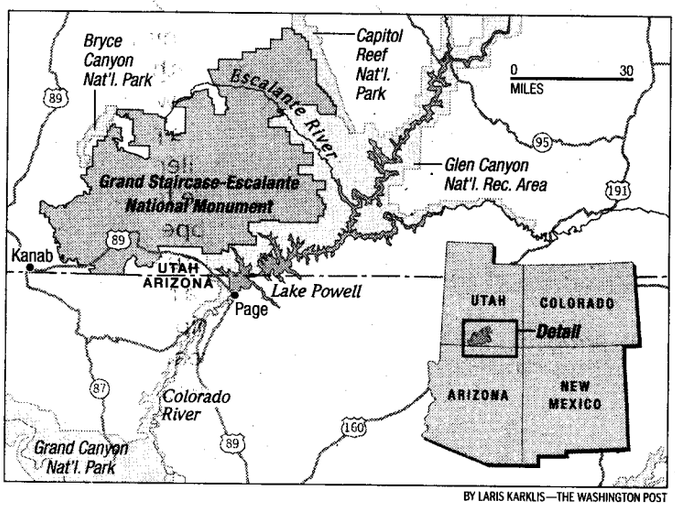


BY LARIS KARKLIS—THE WASHINGTON POST

ESCALANTE, Utah Quinn Griffin has peacefully raised cattle on a remote plateau of federal land here for decades, but when he missed a deadline for removing his herd last summer, U.S. government cowboys swooped down in helicopters and airlifted his cows off the mountain.

The government auctioned off some of his cattle, threatened to put him out of business, and then sent him a $50,000 bill to cover its costs.

Griffin, a businessman and civic leader in southern Utah's picturesque Grand Staircase-Escalante region, says the government's action would have been unthinkable at one time. But all that changed after the Clinton administration declared the vast, rugged area a national monument four years ago.

"It's a serious situation when they take your cattle and sell them without giving you a chance," Griffin said. "Everybody here believes this is happening because of the monument."

Griffin's complaint about federal heavy-handedness has echoes across the West. As the government heightens its role as manager over an increasing expanse of federally protected land, the volume of complaints by landowners is rising. People who have lived in remote, sprawling areas such as the Grand Staircase all their lives, or who moved to them in search of solitude or a feeling of independence, bristle at what they say are federal efforts to micromanage their lives and restrict access to the land.

"They've tightened the reins, but the people around here weren't ready for it because they were used to going their own way," said Sharol Bernardo, who operates a motel and gift shop. "And believe me, this town likes to go its own way."

It is that sentiment that President Bush and Vice President Cheney are tapping into when they talk about their roots in the West, and the endless possibilities and rugged individualism suggested by its vast open spaces. It is helping to guide the administration as it examines whether to undo some of former president Bill Clinton's actions, on land use as well as the environment.

Many of the grievances are reminiscent of the "sagebrush rebellion" of the 1970s and '80s, when Western conservatives raised the battle cry against what they deemed excessive federal control of land. They were given new life as the Clinton administration vastly expanded the government's reach.

Over the last four years, Clinton made unprecedented use of the 1906 Antiquities Act to establish 19 national monuments in areas his administration deemed unique or historic. Tough restrictions were imposed on commercial and recreational activities on nearly 6 million acres of federal land.

Bush has ordered a review of Clinton's actions. Western property owners, local officials and environmentalists are watching what happens in the Grand Staircase—the first and most controversial of the monument designations—for signs of what direction Bush will take. Although the administration has said an outright repeal is unlikely, it is considering shrinking the size of some areas and easing rules governing private activity.

The Grand Staircase is a tableau of rust-hued mountain cliffs, mesas, desert and wild rivers. The 1.9 million-acre monument contains a vast geological stairway to the West, rising 5,500 feet to the rim of Bryce Canyon. Pioneering geologist Clarence Dutton first dubbed it the Grand Staircase. Farther to the east, the massive Kaiparowits Plateau and the Canyons of the Escalante are rich in history and archaeological and geological wonders.

The monument designation in September 1996 had a dramatic impact. Local officials, businessmen and residents complain that, in the name of preserving the area's natural beauty, the federal government has imposed overly restrictive grazing policies and hampered recreational activities.

They also say the government effectively torpedoed plans by a Dutch mining company to open a coal mine that would have created hundreds of jobs. Within two years of Clinton's decision, Andalex Resources Co. sold its leases on 34,000 acres of land to the federal government for nearly $17 million, according to officials with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which administers federal lands.

Small business operators say excessive regulation has hurt them. Sue Fearon, an outfitter in nearby Boulder, Utah, who offers guided tours of the area's red rock canyons, says some competitors have gone out of business since the BLM limited the size of camping groups to 12 and barred horses from coming within 200 feet of a river or stream, to prevent pollution.

"Gradualism gets you every time, and if I'm gradually being forced out, let's be up front about it," Fearon said. "I'm afraid that after the cows go, commercial interests like mine are next."

BLM officials and environmental groups describe the Grand Staircase as an unfolding success story. They note that at the same time precious natural resources are being protected, tourism has doubled, to nearly 1 million visitors annually.

"Although the controversy is heated initially, over time these places prove their value and become popular," said monument manager Kate Cannon. "The Grand Canyon and Grand Teton initially were monuments with a great deal of controversy around them, and now they are some of the best-loved pieces of protected land."

At the core of the complaints about federal intrusiveness is the proclamation issued by Clinton for governing the monument region. Rather than seeking to cultivate the Grand Staircase as a national park, and therefore encourage its accessibility to tourists, hikers and sportsmen, the BLM's principal mandate is to protect natural resources and limit the amount of commercial activity around the areas.

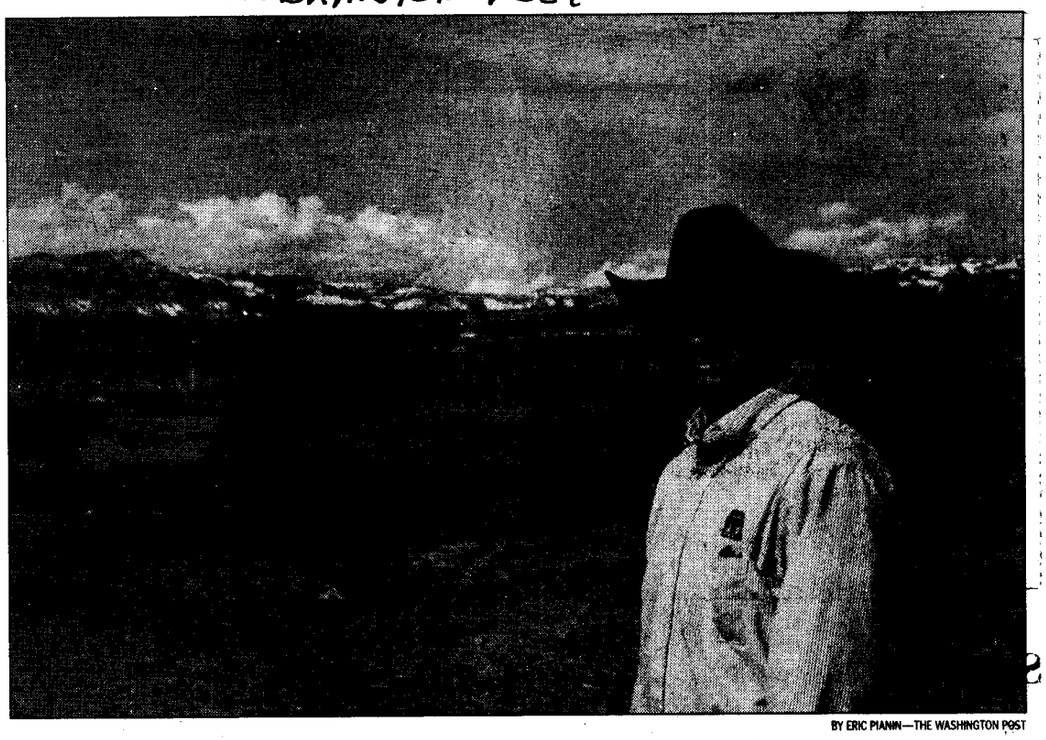
The land bureau's staff has nearly doubled, to 65 employees, over the past four years, and many have little experience working with residents of the provincial and insular area. In the past, the skeletal land management workforce tended to be lax or flexible in enforcing grazing and other regulations. Now the officials closely adhere to the rules, which has created hard feelings.

Residents complain that many jobs sparked by the monument's creation are low-paying and that what added tourism there has been—the number of visitors tapered off last year during a heat wave—has brought little benefit to the economy.

"Tourism is a hard row to hoe, and if making beds, cleaning toilets and flipping pancakes makes it, we would have made it a long time ago," said Joe C. Judd, chairman of the Kane County Commission.

THE WASHINGTON POST, APRIL 29, 2001
WASHINGTON DC

WASHINGTON POST



BY ERIC PIANIN—THE WASHINGTON POST

The U.S. government removed Quinn Griffin's herd after Utah land he worked became part of a national monument.

The fight over grazing that led the federal government to airlift Quinn Griffin's cattle off the plateau was as much a clash of values and customs as a battle over the specific terms of the government's grazing permits. The three ranchers involved—Griffin, a local businessman and former teacher; his uncle, Gene Quinn; and Mary Bullock—have raised cattle on 50 Mile Mountain, a remote plateau near Escalante, for decades.

Griffin, 49, was born in Provo, Utah, 150 miles to the north. He grew up in Escalante and returned here to marry and raise a family of six children after attending high school in Elko, Nev.

The soft-spoken Griffin has taught classes at a church, dabbled in real estate and helped launch a community-based campaign to expand educational opportunities. But like his father before him, he has devoted much of his energy to raising cattle on the plateau.

Mountaintop grazing is challenging and risky because the weather is uncertain and cattle are difficult to control and move on and off the mountain. Yet Griffin and others cling to the practice because of the challenge and the solitude.

"It's remote. You're by yourself," he said. "Sometimes during the winter, you're the only people around for 30 miles. If you like to be on a horse, that's the place to be."

When the BLM last spring ordered the three ranchers to cut short their grazing season by a month and remove nearly 400 head of cattle in an effort to preserve the land, they balked, then tried to comply. By then, however, the bureau had swept in with cowboys on horseback and in helicopters, and accused the three of bad faith.

BLM officials say they extended the Sept. 1 deadline but eventually were forced to act to uphold the terms of the grazing permits and to prevent the cattle from destroying the vegetation. Griffin and Bullock contend they were singled out as part of a broader effort to end grazing on the plateau.

Several environmental groups allied with the BLM, including the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance and the Grand Canyon Trust, oppose grazing on 50 Mile Mountain and many other areas of the monument. Some environmentalists say the relatively cheap grazing permits issued by the government are a form of welfare to ranchers and a detriment to the land.

The Grand Canyon Trust, a preservation group, has been buying grazing permits of ranchers along the Escalante River and its tributaries, which abut 50 Mile Mountain. Last May, before the controversy erupted, Cannon, the monument manager, urged Bullock to consider selling her grazing permit to the Grand Canyon Trust.

Bullock contends that the BLM began its crackdown as punishment after she rejected entreaties from the Grand Canyon trust to discuss selling her permit—a contention that bureau and trust officials deny. "They want my ranch, so they just beat me up to sell it," she said.